

BECOMING THE SALT AND THE LIGHT

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Anyone who spends any time around the church, not “church” in the abstract, but the institutional church, with its worn-out linoleum floors and its 19th century hymns, and its propensity to trivialize the gospel and its tendency to make mountains out of molehills and what is far worse, molehills out of mountains, and its use of its own message of love and redemption to be unlovely and exclusive and sometimes downright hateful—anyone who knows anything about the institutional church, becomes quickly

impatient with it and sometimes sick at heart over it. Those who continue to love the church want it to be so much more than it is—more biblical, more faithful, more inclusive, more relevant, more Christocentric, friendlier, bigger, more evangelical.

Author and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner wrote, “Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away, the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would

have left would be each other and Christ,
which was all there was in the first place.”¹

But even Buechner’s draconian scenario
isn’t radical enough because the simple fact
is that the earliest church never quite lived up
to Jesus’ hopes for it or our routine
romantization of it. And, one assumes, it
never lived up to its own expectations of
itself, either.

With a twinkle in her eye, author Annie
Dillard, who spent time as an adolescent
sitting in the balcony of a Presbyterian church
in Pittsburgh and, therefore, speaks from
authentic experience, says:

“What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ came the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and self-importance....They set out immediately to take over the world and they pretty much did it. They converted emperors, raised armies, lined their pockets with real money, and did evil things large and small, in century after century, including this one. They are

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*, Harper, San Francisco, 1992, p.158.

smug and busy, just like us and who could believe in them?"²

A New Way of Life

It turns out that Frederick Buechner and Annie Dillard, and many people like them, including I, assume most of the people who will read this book have not given up on the church. And the reason is that every now and then the church speaks the truth; and the truth, as Jesus promised, sets men and women free. Every now and then the church puts its money where its mouth is, and

² Annie Dillard, "The Gospel According to Saint Luke" in *Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, Edited by Alfred Corn, Viking, 1990, New York, p. 36.

invests in the welfare of its community—loves the world in the same way its Lord did, and the world somehow becomes a little more of what God created it to be. Every now and then, in fact, with quiet consistency, day in and day out, year after year, century after century, the church proclaims the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, and then actually expresses that love, incarnates that love, and human life is saved, recovered, reformed, celebrated, challenged, reimagined, reanimated, renewed, recreated.

It is fashionable to critique the church for the negative impact its presence and mission have had on the life of the world. It is

politically correct to acknowledge that the Christian church has been elitist and imperialistic and has superimposed western values, western culture on people of other cultures in its missionary enterprise.

But there is another way to tell that story without denying the accuracy and appropriateness of the critique. From the very beginning, the Christian church was conspicuous by the way it bridged the gap that divided the culture of the first century: gaps of gender, age, race, social status, religion, morality. The early church was conspicuous, as was its Lord, because of its inclusivity. The early Christians, in addition to

their flaws and foibles, ate together, learned together, prayed together and actually began to care about and for one another in a way the world recognized. “See how they love one another,” people said when they looked at the church.

The first and best evangelism project of the church turns out to be the quality of life lived in the world: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...they broke bread at home and ate their food with good and generous hearts praising God, and having the good will of all the people” (Acts 2:42, 46b-47a).

Kenneth Woodward, religion writer for *Newsweek* wrote an essay for the millenium, "2000 Years of Jesus," which highlights critical changes in history which happened because of Christianity and the Christian church. "Like a supernova, the initial impact of Christianity on the ancient Greco-Roman world produced shock waves that continued to register long after the Roman Empire disappeared."³

The Christian church introduced a new idea of God to the world. Out of its own Hebrew theological heritage, it proclaimed the good news of God who relates to individual women and men and children in a

³ Kenneth L. Woodward, "2000 Years of Jesus" *Newsweek*, March 29, 1999.

personal and intimate way, a God who loves like the nursing mother and a waiting father. The church, because of its basic theology, began to practice, demonstrate and proclaim the worth and value of individual human life.

The early Christian church protected the children. Under Roman law, fathers could choose to keep or abandon a newborn. Female babies were particularly vulnerable. A study of grave sites at Delphi revealed that of 600 upper class families, only a half-dozen raised more than one daughter. Unwanted children were simply “cast out,” which meant abandoned in the streets to die of exposure.

The early Christian church became an orphanage for the unwanted babies.⁴

I often wonder what his friends thought when Jesus called them “salt” and “light:” “You are the salt of the earth: but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but it is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:13-15).

⁴ *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper, San Francisco, 1994, p.62-64.

New Testament scholars continue to study those provocative metaphors and every preacher knows not only the standard interpretations, but also their rich potential for sermonizing. They are deceptively modest, functional metaphors. Salt and light. Both, in spite of their modesty, have profound effects on their environment. Salt preserves. It changes food, makes it more tasty, more lively, more zesty. A salt-free diet can be bland and uninteresting. Light abolishes darkness. The darker the darkness, the more visible the light, even a tiny candle. You need light in order to see. You need light to find

your way home, or wherever it is you are going.

“You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world,” Jesus told his disciples, and I’ve always wondered what they thought about it, what we think about it today. The great temptation of Christianity and the Christian church has always been to get out of the world figuratively or literally. Followers of Jesus have always been tempted to give up on the world, reject the world, retreat from the world—to a monastery, a mountaintop, to the comfort of its own insular community protected by gothic stone walls, or esoteric

vocabulary, or inaccessible buildings,
liturgies, rites and regulations.

“You are salt and light,” Jesus told his first friends. He commissioned them with those metaphors to resist the temptation to withdraw, and called them to become his followers, his disciples, his women and men in the world, to be seasoning and light to those around them.

It was a lesson to which he returned. At a critical juncture in the gospel story, Jesus took his closest friends, Peter, James and John, up onto a mountaintop. Peter, just six days earlier, had responded to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” with

the breathtaking affirmation, “You are the messiah, the son of the living God.” But moments later Peter showed that he did not understand at all the meaning and implication of his startling declaration by refusing to accept Jesus’ explanation that he must suffer and die. The incident ends powerfully with Jesus’ sharpest rebuke of his close friend. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me” (Matthew 16:23).

And so it was an important gesture when Peter, along with James and John, was invited to go with Jesus to the mountain. While they were there, one of the most mysterious incidents in the gospel narrative occurred:

“He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). Jesus’ identity was affirmed and Peter’s bold declaration was confirmed by the appearance of heroic and messianic figures from the past, Moses and Elijah. Once again, Peter misunderstands, this time wanting to preserve the mysterious moment of revelation on the mountain by building booths. And again, Jesus rebukes Peter, more gently this time, by ignoring his suggestion and leading Peter and the others down from the mountain of transfiguration to the valley where there is a crowd of people waiting for

them and a desperate father with an epileptic son. The word here is strong and pointed. The disciples want to stay on the mountain, isolated, away from the distractions of life, free to reflect and pray and meditate and to receive God's gift of revelation. The disciples want to withdraw from the ambiguities of the world. But Jesus won't allow it. Instead, Jesus leads them back down to a waiting crowd and urgent human need.

Near the end of the story, the motif emerges again. Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem, "sets his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). The disciples are reluctant, afraid, preferring the safety of life in Galilee.

The disciples want to stay in security. Jesus goes on ahead of them to the city, the capital, the fulcrum of the nation's life, Jerusalem.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, wrote to his parents the day after the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler failed, and therefore, the day he knew, with a final certainty, that he was going to die: "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment, that it is only by living

completely in the world, that one learns to believe.”⁵

The Church in the World

Learning to be a faithful follower of Jesus means living more deeply in the world. It is an important moment in the journey of discipleship. Jesus Christ does not want us, nor his church, to withdraw from life in order to be faithful to him. In fact, Jesus wants us to plunge more deeply and intentionally into life. The faithful Christian life is not one of adhering to a list of prohibitions; faith does not diminish one’s life. To the contrary, Jesus

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, July 21, 1944, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1953.

Christ is God's great, "Yes!" to life. The incarnation is God's great affirmation of human life. The Gospel narrative is the story of God loving the world and saving the world. Following Jesus, trusting Jesus, as individuals and as church, means living more intentionally, more passionately; exposing oneself to more life, more pain, more suffering, more joy, more agony, more ecstasy, more tears, more laughter—most importantly, more love.

"You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world," he told them. It is why the church exists in the first place, to be salt and light in and for the world. To live, not for

itself, but for the world. “The church exists for mission as fire exists for burning,” Emil Brunner put it.

The story of the church following Jesus into the world in mission is inspiring. In the Republic of Korea there is a strong and life-giving Christian church because of the faithful work of missionaries who knew their calling to love and serve the world in addition to proclaiming good news and recruiting church members. When Horace Underwood arrived from America in the late 1880s, he founded churches and Severance Hospital in Korea. And when, several years later, Korea was stricken by a virulent cholera epidemic,

physicians and nurses from the new Christian hospital began to care for the sick and dying. The impact was impressive. The standard method for dealing with infectious disease before that time was to isolate infectious persons, often times totally abandoning the sick and dying to face pain and death alone. Korean people were astonished to see Christians ministering to cholera victims, risking infection and death because of something they believed about God and God's love in Jesus Christ. When western Christians ask Korean church leaders about the phenomenal growth of the church in Korea, the response always includes the clear

identification of the missionaries with the Korean people. The Christian church, from the outset, left its buildings and institutions to stand with the Korean people in times of need, crisis, conflict and suffering, beginning with the cholera epidemic and later during the Japanese invasion, occupation and persecution. The Korean church has distinguished itself and successfully proclaimed the good news, sustaining steady and strong growth because of its focus on the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Today the Korean church relates to universities and hospitals, and has an ambitious global mission enterprise of its own.

“You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world,” he told his disciples. The church in the Balkans lives out those metaphors with heroic faithfulness in the midst of war, ethnic cleansing and a deep racism that casts a shadow on the future. In Ocijek, Croatia, the Croation Reformed Church, in collaboration with ecumenical partners including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), provides a theological seminary for Reformed students from many countries whose governments regard one another with suspicion and hostility. The Agape Project provides food and shelter for the thousands of refugees who characterize the entire region:

Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox Christians, Croatian Catholics. Bosnian Muslim refugees are mostly women, children and elderly men. Young men and boys have disappeared. At an Agape feeding center in Ocijek, Muslim women bring whatever container they can find, bottles, kettles, scrub buckets, and stand in line to receive soup and a loaf of bread. An old woman, a Muslim, asked who was providing the food, was told that it was American Christians. With tears in her eyes, she said, "Tell them my husband and son were shot, my home was destroyed. I have nothing. Tell them that without this

food I would starve to death. Tell them I say,
'God bless them.'"

The Agape Project is an heroic example of Christians following their Lord into the world, to its most desperate and neediest places. One of Agape's projects is rebuilding destroyed villages and resettling the people who were driven out of them by armed forces. Plans for the reconstruction of a Muslim village included assembling materials, money and labor to rebuild every structure that had been destroyed in the sustained bombardment. The Muslim village chief, or mayor, who was consulting with a representative of Agape, noted that Agape

was planning to rebuild the Islamic Mosque which had been blown to bits. “Why would you Christians who have been trying to convert us for a thousand years, want to rebuild our mosque?” he asked. The Agape representative was able to explain that Christians will rebuild an Islamic Mosque because we follow a Lord who orders us to love neighbors as ourselves, a Lord who told about a good man, a member of a despised racial minority, who knelt by the roadside to save the life of one who had been brutally beaten, a Lord who did not inquire about an individual’s religious identity before healing, helping and restoring. “You are the salt of

the earth...the light of the world," Jesus said.

The church is called to be in mission, sent into all the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Local congregations as well as denominational mission agencies are called to be in the world. Distinguished University of Chicago sociologist, Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that the very existence of a church building, even one that is closed twenty-four hours per day, has a positive and measurable effect on the health of the surrounding neighborhood. And churches with open doors and programs to meet the needs of neighbors are usually vital, healthy, and many times, growing churches. It's not only for the sake of

the world that he called his disciples salt and light. It was for their own spiritual growth and faith and health.

A recent study conducted by the Church Growth Strategy Team of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) revealed that growing churches share one common characteristic—a commitment to mission in the world. In spite of theological and liturgical diversity, growing mainline churches are extending their love and compassion and concern for justice into the neighborhoods and cities, the nation and the world. Mission is the key. Housing for the homeless, community feeding programs, day care, elderly day care, Head Start, after

school tutoring programs for children. Vital churches are in mission. Mission seems to be the healthy, life-giving ingredient. And the opposite is sadly obvious. Declining churches, for one reason or another, are not ordinarily extending themselves into the world, but absorbing all their spiritual, emotional, physical and monetary resources in the struggle to survive.

Jesus called his disciples the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is the mission of the people and the institution which claims his name to be in the world as radically and courageously as He was. It is the mission of His church to be salt and light.

Finding the Way Home

Light is necessary to see, to know where one is, to find one's way. A light in the window is a sign of welcome, of hospitality, of home.

The world desperately needs an institution with a heart and soul big enough to give itself to its mission and, at the same time, to be the light of welcome and homecoming. The world desperately needs someone to be what Jesus called his followers to be—a place of consistent grace and unconditional love. We live in a violent world: a world in which hate groups use the new communications potential of the Internet to

spread their ideas of racial purity and racial violence, a world in which the phrase “ethnic cleansing” describes an appalling new reality—governments and paramilitary organizations working to exterminate entire populations because of ethnic, tribal and religious identity.

Politically and socially we seem to be caught in a new paradigm of win/lose. Every issue, every difference of opinion, every modest conflict, is inflated to major status with winning, at all costs, the new moral imperative. Those who disagree with prevailing opinions or conventional wisdom are enemies who must be destroyed. It has

become a hard world in which older virtues of civility and propriety and respect for one's opponent are increasingly rare. A professor at Georgetown University, Deborah Tannen, says that Americans have developed a "corrosive, contentious, argument culture—attacking and destroying opponents has become the mantra of the day."⁶

Even religious institutions reflect this new phenomenon. Denominational meetings, General Assemblies, Annual Conferences, which used to be best characterized as wonderful family reunions, increasingly feel

⁶ *Chicago Tribune* Book Review, March 29, 1998, Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate and Dialogue*, Random House, 1998.

like contentious confrontations, political and ideological battlefields where every issue is debated, evaluated and then voted on the basis of ideological impact.

The world desperately needs what Jesus called his followers to be: salt and light—the light of hospitality, a community of people who love one another and show the world how to love.

William Placher argues that the purpose of religious denominations is to be communities of love and acceptance, unity in diversity where individuals feel welcome and affirmed, not battlefields where we fight one another over the “hot button” issues of the

day until one side wins and the other slinks away in defeat or withdraws altogether. Denominations, Placher said, are places where theology means more than ideology —“places in our society where people from widely diverse places across the political spectrum can talk about substantial issues within the context of an ongoing community of shared beliefs.” Referring to the most difficult and contentious issues that threaten to divide the churches, Placher says, “If we can keep these conversations going, we mainline Protestants will make a major contribution to holding this fragmenting society of ours together.”⁷

How are we going to do this? How are we going to be the salt of the earth and, at the same time, a community of acceptance and respect that provides the light of true community in a desperately needy world?

We might begin by thinking in a new way about these precious institutions of ours called churches. We might actually stop evaluating them in the way our market culture models for us, *i.e.*, on the basis of productivity and profitability, membership rolls and budgets, and actually start looking at how much love and compassion and justice are being done in the world. And we might

⁷ *The Christian Century*, April 22-29, 1998, p. 421, "Sticking Together."

actually start to think anew about the church as the only way we have of living out the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, in community, not as one more arena in which to do ideological battle with opponents.

Author Anne Lamott describes her return to faith and the church in her book, *Traveling Mercies*. It is the story of a small church being salt of the earth and light of the world in a remarkably life transforming and life-saving way. The book is dedicated to the people of that small congregation, who took her in and affirmed her and loved her in a time of desperate personal need.

Lamott tells a story about church as salt of the earth and light of the world. A seven-year-old girl became lost one day. She “ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, ‘You could leave me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.’”⁸

⁸ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1999, p.55.

How are we to become salt of the earth and light of the world? Nowhere does the biblical tradition suggest that doing God's will is merely a matter of trying harder. Rather, the gracious invitation of the Gospel is to allow God's love in Jesus Christ to work in transforming ways in the lives of individuals and in the life of the church. And so, perhaps what we most need to do is invite Jesus to be part of our churches, listen to him, do what he tells us to do and be what he calls us to be.

We are Your people
Lord, by your grace,
You dare to make us
Christ to our neighbors
of every nation and race.

Lord as we minister
in different ways

may all we're doing
show that You're living
meeting Your love with our praise.⁹

⁹ John Wilson and Brian Wren, *We Are Your People*,
The Presbyterian Hymnal.

